Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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PILGER ISSUES PUMPKIN-GROWING CHALLENGE

The Village of Pilger has thrown down the gauntlet.

In its quest to claim the title of Pumpkin Capital of Saskatchewan, the village has issued a challenge to other communities to compete in a pumpkin-growing contest. The winner will be the community that grows the largest pumpkin.

So far, response to the challenge has been hot. Organizer Felix Fischer knows of several communities competing, including Nokomis, Radisson, Hafford and Silton.

Fischer says it is not too late to join the challenge, but growers will need to get on board quickly. Prize-winning pumpkins require at least 120 frost-free growing days, according to Fischer. For this reason, many growers start their plants indoors or in enclosures.

Beyond frost-free weather, pumpkins have other needs. "The most important factors are good nutrients, and they consume an awful lot of water," said Fischer.

Pruning is another important component of pumpkin care. In explaining his strategy, Fischer noted that the first pumpkin allowed to grow should be eight to 10 feet from the main root. Other giant pumpkin growers suggest training vines and root pruning in order to prevent the fast-growing pumpkin fruit from squashing or splitting the vine.

Commercial pumpkin producers use bees to pollinate their crops. Hand pollination allows for more certainty that the job will get done. Begin when the crop has about 200 leaves. Leaving up to half a dozen pumpkins per plant is okay for a start, but once the fruit reaches volleyball size, choose the best one and discard the rest.

Giant pumpkins are generally grown for competition but, according to Fischer, their function extends beyond bragging rights. Although small sugar pumpkins are bred for use in cooking, the pulp from giant pumpkins produces excellent cheesecake and pie.

The province's pre-eminent pumpkin production will be on display at the Pilger Pumpkin Festival. The event began four years ago as a pumpkin-growing contest. When participation doubled in size, it evolved into its current festival format.

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The community challenge is a new addition to the event, as is a carving contest for youth. The village has planted a patch in a garden donated by a local resident to ensure that all children will be able to participate. The pumpkins grown in the Pilger Pumpkin Patch are expected to weigh from 30 to 50 pounds.

Last year's prize-winning pumpkin in the weigh-off was a 365-pound entry from Jerry Doll of Middle Lake. Pilger's own community record is 417 pounds.

While Fischer is confident in Pilger's growing abilities, he will be wary of the entry from Nokomis. Last year, a grower there produced the largest pumpkin in the province, weighing in at 463 pounds. The season, however, is young and the residents will work hard as they vie for a fun source of fame for their community.

Anyone interested in competing in the Pilger Pumpkin Festival community challenge can contact Felix Fischer at (306) 367-4912.

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For more information, contact:

Felix Fischer
Pilger Pumpkin Growers
Phone: (306) 367-4912
E-mail: felix2linda@yahoo.ca